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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the ways in which the provision for adult literacy in Northern Ireland has developed since 1975. Questionnaires were circulated to program organizers, tutors, and other personnel to determine (1) enrollment patterns, (2) program organization and the evolution toward "adult basic education," (3) personnel resources and training, (4) teaching methods and materials, and (5) the program organizer's role. Results indicated that the program enrollments increased dramatically over the 10-year period and that program organization made a marked movement away from home-based toward group-based instruction. Findings also showed that while the use of trained volunteer tutors was a financial necessity, their poor attendance record caused considerable disruption. Though many organizers were found to be full-time staff, data suggested that most wanted to be rid of their adult literacy responsibilities after a relatively short period of time--possibly because there was little recognition or opportunity in the duties. Findings also revealed organizers' need for a clearer definition of "adult literacy." The study suggests that programs should use a more purposeful, developmental approach in the future. (Tables of data are included.) (JD)

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Adult Literacy and Adult Basic Education in Northern Ireland - 10 years on

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Adult Literacy and Adult Basic Education- 10 years on in Northern Ireland

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Introduction

In 1975 the revelation that more than two million adults in England and Wales lacked basic literacy made the headlines. At the same time it was estimated that the number of adults experiencing the same disadvantage in Northern Ireland was more than 50,000.

The response in Britain was to launch a major nationwide campaign, one of the main features of which was a BBC TV series of an instructional/informational kind directed at those in need and transmitted at peak viewing times. The campaign also included locally based support groups consisting of volunteers and professionals to provide tutorial assistance within the framework of locally devised programmes.

In Northern Ireland responsibility for organising the campaign was given to the Council for Continuing Education.The Council, in turn, decided that the five Education and Library Boards through their respective colleges of Further Education should be responsible for organising the local programmes.

To counter this degree of decentralisation an Adult Literacy Liaison Group was established within the Department of Education in Belfast. With this Group was linked the Central Referral Agency responsible for dealing with enquiries about the campaign and for putting adults in need in touch with the tutor-organisers in the FE colleges.

Referral Officers were also appointed within each Education and Library Board and twenty-three tutor-organisers appointed. These organisers were drawn from amongst existing tutors in the FE colleges, or were specially appointed on a part-time basis. In the case of the former their responsibilities for adult literacy courses became only one of their responsibilities.

The key personnel were to be, and still are, the tutor organisers and the literacy tutors, the latter consisting of both paid and volunteer tutors. The tutor organisers interviewed adults referred to them, assessed the nature of their need and arranged tutorial assistance for them. In keeping with the confidentiality which surrounded the programmes at the outset, tutorials were often arranged on a one-to-one basis, frequently in the homes of the adults concerned. Hence the need for a large number of volunteer tutors. Tutorial assistance was also provided on a small group basis in local centres, usually the local FE college.

Over the decade since the introduction of this general provision for

adult literacy changes in the general educational environment and in the wider social, economic and political climate have gradually begun to have their impact on it. So too have changes and developments within the programmes themselves. It is aspects of these changes and developments which are being discussed in this paper.

For example, among the educational developments have been the introduction of the Youth Training Programme and the Adult Employment Initiative, elements of which are the responsibility of FE colleges. Both are responses to the huge and tragic increase in the numbers of unemployed. Both programmes target on much of the same sector of the population from which many of the participants in adult literacy programmes were drawn. Both however, have wider educational briefs than literacy development, although literacy has been recognised as one of their most important.

Coinciding with the introduction of such programmes was the growing realisation on the part of some within the adult literacy programme that for many of the participants basic literacy, narrowly defined, was not all they required.Their disadvantage was seen to be, in many cases, rooted in an inadeaquate general educational development. Hence the move towards providing within the programme what is now designated as 'adult basic education' to provide literacy instruction within a wider developmental context.

These and other developments and changes form the background and the rationale to the research drawn upon for this paper.

Previous and Present Research

The aim of this research has been to investigate the way in which the provision for adult literacy has developed since 1975. Among the main issues investigated have been enrolment patterns, the organisation of the programmes and their evolution towards 'adult basic education', the resources of personnel and their training, teaching methods and materials and finally the role of the organisers of the programmes.

This study builds on experience gained in earlier research (Johnston 1976) which investigated characteristics of the adult participants in the prgramme in its very early stages. It also takes account of the only full-scale study of the provision for adult literacy in Northern Ireland conducted by Downey and Dwyer(1980)

The present research has been conducted in two phases.In phase one a comprehensive 100 part questionnnaire was circulated to all 27 organisers in Northern Ireland. The questionnaire was aimed at obtaining a detailed picture of the current provision of adult literacy programmes. All 27 returned the completed questionnaire.

In phase two a stratified random sample of teacher tutors and of volunteer tutors was asked to complete another detailed questionnaire. All organisers were interviewed during this phase in order to obtain further information on a number of issues identified as important

following the analysis of their responses. Among the issues so identified were the deployment and training of tutors, developments within the scheme, the progress of participants and the difficulties encountered. Other key personnel, like area board officers, were also interviewed. Finally a number of hypthoses relating to differences in provision and between teacher and volunteer tutors were investigated.

From the study the developments over the ten year period of the programme selected for further discussion in this paper are as follows:

(i).enrolment patterns
(ii).organisation of the programme
(iii).evolution towards 'adult basic education'
(iv).personnel resources and their training
(v).teaching methods and materials
(vi).the organisers

Enrolment patterns

As the figures in Table 1 indicate enrolments in the programme increased over the ten year period from 93 reported as receiving some form of basic literacy instruction before the programme was even launched in 1975 to 914 in 1985.The peak was in 1983-84 when 1007 participants were reported.

Table 1 Enrolment patterns 1974-5 to 1984-5

1974-5	1975-6	1976-7	1978-9	1979-80	1980-81	1981-2	1983-4	1984-5
93	691	937	756	591	773	890	1007	991

Bearing in mind the 1975 estimate of 50,000 adults disadvantaged these figures are rather small and in total only amount to 4,000 adults in need being assisted.

At the very beginning of the programme there was a fear that resources would not be adequate to the demand and publicity, although extensive, was not as intensive as it might have been. Today, in a situation of cut-backs, financial constraints also affect publicity and recruitment. Some Area Boards do not seem anxious to publicise their provision and some excuse this by claiming that the need is currently being met. With no hard evidence to demonstrate that this is so and plenty to the contrary, this claim has a rather hollow ring.

Organisation of the programme

One of the most notable features in the organisation of the programmes has been the very marked movement away from home-based tuition. In 1975 14 per cent of the participants were receiving home-based tuition, a figure which had climbed to 22 per cent in the following

year. But by 1985 only 2.2 per cent were home-based. No Area Board fails to allow for home-based tuition but clearly the move towards centre-based tuition is such as to make home-based tuition very much the exception.

The case for locating tuition in participants' homes was initially based on respect for the feelings of adults ashamed at not being able to read or write in a society where basic literacy, at least, seemed to be taken as a normal accomplishment. Anyone not so accomplished was, to many of themselves, 'abnormal' and the desire to 'hide' their abnormality came to dominate much of their behaviour. Hence the decision to observe a high degree of confidentiality as far as participants in the programme were concerned.

Initial contact between organisers and participants, therefore, took place in the latters' homes, or in another mutually agreed venue and home based-tuition offered.

However, it was soon noted, Downey and Dwyer(ibid), that many of the participants who opted for home-based tuition lived a restricted social life directly because of their literacy problems. Once they became aware of the possibility of centre-based tuition many expressed a desire to attend a centre because it provided them with the opportunity to go out somewhere meaningful and non-threatening.

Closely linked to the move away from home-based tuition was the move to group tuition. This was also in response to the sense of social isolation which participants had been experiencing.

It has to admitted that group and centre-based tutition also have their attractions from an organisational point of view particularly given the problems of ensuring a regular supply of volunteer tutors to meet one-to-one and the demands of home based tuition.

However, the move towards group based tuition has not been without controversy as some organisers and tutors remain hesitant about abandoning the one-to-one situation. It had been felt, in the early days of the programme, that for total non-readers in particular and quite apart from the desire to respect confidentiality, the one-to-one situation would be essential. Such participants, it was felt, would have had such a degree of failure behind them that only close and intensive tuition would succeed in helping them overcome their problem.

That still remains a general view. All 150 participants in the 1984-5 programme assessed as non-readers on entry received their tuition on a on-to-one basis. So also did almost another 250 not so assessed, but for whom it was decided that the on-to-one situation was likely to be the most effective. However, since one-to-one tutition is now usually based in centres it means that all participants can enjoy some of the extra-class activities organised as part of the whole programme which are a feature of most centres and can, of course, be easily moved into groups if desirable.

Another organisational development has been the provision of day-time in addition to evening classes. In the beginning tuition was organised exclusively in the evening. In recent years in response to the needs of the unemployed it became evident that day-time provision was necessary. Just over one third of the colleges are now providing day-time as well as evening programmes. Furthermore in eight centres programmes are not now completely abandoned when the summer break occurs. Such continuity is felt to contribute considerably to the progress of participants.

'Mopping-up'or on-going need ?

The developments described above were amongst those which led to the realisation that far from being a temporary 'mopping-up' operation as was first anticipated in 1975 the adult literacy programme was in fact meeting an on-going need. It was realised that there would probably always be adults who leave school with less than an adequate attainment in literacy.

In 1979 a report by the Council for Adult and Continuing Education in England and Wales which examined how the Adult Literacy programme might be developed to meet this on-going need recommended the development of 'adult basic education' programmes. In other words the report was saying that the literacy needs of those attracted to the adult literacy programmes were but one dimension of their overall educational needs.

The recommendation that adult literacy be seen in this wider context was not readily accepted everywhere. In Northern Ireland it is true to say that in many centres, perhaps still in most, the focus remains very much on literacy with a small number of centres following the Council's recommendation to broaden the nature of their programmes.

Reservations about broadening their literacy programmes have been expressed by those who fear that the 'literacy' needs of the target group may be lost sight of. Some organisers and tutors claim that the adult literacy programmes had quite clear objectives. They are not sure that such is the case with what is termed 'adult basic education'. They also fear that the number of participants will be adversely affected both because of the absence of clearly stated aims, and because the courses may appear too wide to meet their immediate needs.

Teaching personnel

The use of volunteer tutors alongside professionals has been a feature of adult litercy provision not only in Britain and in Northern Ireland but elsewhere as well. Volunteer involvement is very unusual in a formal educational provision. In the particular context of adult literacy it perhaps owes something to Paolo Freire's model of literacy development for third world countries which encourages the literate, no matter what their level of competence, to become involved in instructing those with less competence than themselves.However, volunteer involvement probably owes much more to the 'social service' concept of adult literacy provision. In the social services the participation of volunteers has a long tradition and at the outset of the programmes with their emphasis on confidentiality, on counselling and on remediation a particular kind of social service ethos rather than an educational flavour predominated. So when it was decided that one-to-one tuition should be available in literacy programmes the use of volunteers answered the problem of how to make the service accessible to large numbers.

Reliance on volunteers is not without its problems, however. Examining the performance of volunteer and professionals in terms of attendance at tuition sessions,the latter compare much more favourably.The overall yearly attendance of paid tutors shows that in four fifths of the centres they have between 91-100% attendance and in only very few of them did this fall below 80% attendance. Volunteer tutors on the other hand record a much lower level of attendance. In only two-fifths of the centres does their attendance match that of the paid volunteers, while in nearly a quarter attendances at less than 80% of the sessions were recorded.

Such a record of attendance by volunteer tutors can of itself cause considerable disruption.

Not surprising, in view of these figures, is the high turn over of volunteer involvement. In nearly three fifths of the centres paid tutors were found to remain in the programme for more than two years whereas in less than a fifth of the centres did volunteer tutors give more than two years service. Nearly a third of the centres experienced a complete turn over of volunteer tutors in less than twelve months.

Such a situation robs the programme of stability and places a severe strain on the organiser who is frequently having to seek out new volunteers.Nevertheless, in the absence of greater financial resources to provide more paid tutors, the need for volunteer tutors remains and on this all organisers are agreed, despite the headaches caused.

Training

Turning now to the question of how well trained and supported are the tutors for their tasks. From the beginning of the programmes attention was paid to training, if only to a limited degree at the outset. The first training courses for tutors were of two-days duration and were conducted by the inspector from the Department of Education

responsible for adult literacy.

Later a group of experienced organisers were involved and course were organised throughout Northern Ireland. Indeed some of the organisers were invited to contribute to training courses in the South as well. All organisers are now encouraged to provide some training for the tutors in their own local schemes and in more than two-thirds of the centres this has been attempted. To assist organisers in planning and conducting such training the Council for Continuing Education has organised residential courses for organisers.

Further scope for training is available to those prepared to study for the Diploma in the Teaching of Literacy Skills offered in two centres.

Principally because of the constraints under which they work not all organisers are willing to provide training courses and of those surveyed a quarter had never done so while another quarter did so irregularly. With a high turn over of tutors the need for training is an ever present one but how the need can ever be adequately met is not clear.

Teaching methods and materials

According to Downey and Dwyer during the early years of the programme there was a very heavy reliance on school material and on school, particularly primary school, methods. With experience and through discussion at training courses an approach based on the needs of the participants evolved and with it the selection and production of materials in keeping with these needs.

Tutors are now more careful to focus their selection of materials, particularly of texts, on the situations and interests of relevance to participants. This approach is not easy since it demands that tutors get to know their students quite well but it is assisted now by the build-up of materials in most centres over the past ten years. Commercially produced material appropriate for adult literacy classes has also appeared on the market over the past ten years obviating the need to resort to school texts of a child's level of interest.

The Adult Literacy Liaison Group itself has published a series of booklets based on local themes to meet the demand expressed by many tutors for texts with a Northern Irish flavour written at an appropriate level. Having had the series produced now it is disappointing to discover that use of them is less than expected.

Organisers

One of the main questions investigated in the research is the position of the organisers. First who are they ?

In 1975 when 23 organisers were appointed only 7 were full-time members of FE colleges. The rest, recruited to the programme on a part-time basis, consisted mainly of primary school and remedial teachers. Today the situation has changed,17 are full time FE college

staff. Table 2 indicates the occupational background of the organisers.

Table 2 Oganisers background

	Further Education	Remedial Education	Primary	Secondary	Special	Non-teach:
1975 (23)	7	6	3	4	3	0
1985 (27)	17	4	3	1	0	2

As the discussion so far has been suggesting, a considerable burden for the delivery of the adult literacy programme falls on the local organisers. Not surpisingly here also there has been a high turn over of personnel. Of those presently in post 17 have under 4 years involvement with the programme and of these 10 have less the two years. Table 3 summarises the period of service of the 27 organisers.

Table 3 Length of service in adult literacy programme

	under 1 year	1-2	3-4	5-6	7-8	9-10
(2)	5	5	7	6	1	3

An added factor which may not always be positive as far as the programe is concerned is that many of the organisers have been relatively inexperienced in terms of their general service. Table 4 indicates the service record of organisers.

Table 4 General service record of organisers

	under 1 year	1-2	3-4	5-6	7-8	9-10
(27)	8	2	7	6	1	3

These figures suggest that many organisers must want to be rid of their adult literacy responsibilities after a relatively short time. Perhaps it is that these responsibilities are not adequately recognised or remunerated and involvement in the adult literacy programme, at least for the full-time organisers, offers no career prospects.

Certainly there are problems in terms of the lack of recognition of the burden of responsibilities. Organisers receive very little remission from other duties in order to meet the demands of the adult literacy programme. Two Area Boards provide no remission at all to their tutor organisers. One organiser who has 86 adults participating in the programme under her supervision has two hours allowance per week. Her case is not untypical which means that organisers conscientiously meeting their responsiblities are themselves volunteers in that they have to give considerably of their own time.

Only in the Belfast Area Board is there an adult literacy organiser with a full-time commitment to this responsibility. He with three part-time organisers has to supervise over 30 centres throughout the city, an onerous responsibility indeed.

Other details regarding the present group of organisers: 9 are male and 18 are female and most are in the 31-40 age group; 17 had not previously been involved in adult literacy prior to taking on the role of organiser. So why or how had they come to take on this responsibility ?

A third of them had been asked because others who had been approached had declined. But others did so because of the challenge, or because of a desire to help others. In assessing their suitability many thought that as teachrs of English, or of Modern Languages that they had an understanding of language which would be useful to the task. Others who had experience as remedial teachers judged that to be of importance.

As a group,the organisers in the survey all felt the need to come together from time to time and to that end have established the Northern Ireland Adult Literacy Organisers' Group as a forum for discussion of problems and for the dissemination of ideas.This group meets once a term and publishes two newsletters a year.

Apart from the problems already mentioned the organisers have indicated such needs as access to telephones to contact tutors,better accommodation for participants in adult literacy classes. Perhaps their current major need is that responsibility for adult literacy be more clearly defined in the career structure of FE. Solving this latter problem in a satisfactory way would result, according to the organisers, in a greater commitment from them and lead to more stability and ultimately to more development in the overall provision.

The significance of this point can be clearly seen in the comments of the organisers on the career implications of being an organiser. Most described it as a "cinderella" responsibility which added nothing to one's prospects.

However, being realistic it is unlikely that any Board outside of Belfast would make adult literacy an area of major responsibility on its own, carrying with it career prospects. In the wider context of Adult Basic Education including responsibility for YTP etc. the opportunities in this respect open up. There is therefore a mercenary motivation for considering the expansion of adult literacy !

Despite everything, however, 24 of the organisers claimed that they did obtian considerable job satisfaction from their work in adult literacy while they remained with it.

Conclusion

After ten years development it is difficult to indicate precisely what has been achieved. A structure to provide programmes is in place, but operating as it is under severe constraints it is not completely clear in which direction it is going. Above all, of course, is the fact that 4,000 adults in need have been assisted, though how effectively is not perhaps another question.

There is now clearly a need to engage in a detailed assessment of the whole provision to ensure a more clearly defined developmental approach for the next ten years.

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